ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 4 Book World

WASHINGTON POST
18 December 1983

Arms and The Man

DEADLY BUSINESS: Sam Cummings, Interarms, and the Arms Trade. By Patrick Brogan and Albert Zarca. Norton. 384 pp. $17.95

By DAVID WISE

THE UNITED STATES, as we are reminded a good deal these days, has always had a benevolent interest in peace and stability in Central America. Back in 1954, for example, Samuel Cummings, a young arms dealer fresh out of the Central Intelligence Agency, provided the guns that the CIA used to overthrow the government of Guatemala.

Even before that, Cummings had made a name for himself. He sold Danish machine guns and Beretta pistols to dictator Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua, who used them to arm Costa Rican exiles. When the exiles crossed the border in 1953, President José "Pepe" Figueres of Costa Rica knew what to do. He called Sam Cummings, who sent him a planeload of Garand rifles and 1,000 machine guns.

As the episode is related in *Deadly Business*, "The armed forces of Costa Rica, using Cummings' weapons, defeated the invaders, who also used Cummings' weapons, supplied to them by Somoza."

Sam Cummings, armorer to the world, will gladly sell to either side in a war. Rebels or dictators, East or West, it makes no difference. Interarms, his global company, will do business. One of his factories is in England, and he has, for complicated reasons, taken British citizenship, but he could hardly wait for the embargo on arms sales to Argentina to be lifted.

Sam Cummings, asked what he would tell the widow of a man killed by one of his products, holds up a pair of scissors and points out that if misused, it is just as deadly as a firearm. (He also quotes John Donne.) Guns don't kill people, he believes, people kill people. There are no moral questions.

His ambition, his biographers tell us, "is to have his trade recognized as benign and as banal as the sale of sewing machines." And in presenting Cummings' side of the argument, they point out that although he is the world's largest private arms dealer, compared to governments—which earn billions in arms sales each year—he is small potatoes. Hardly even a Saturday night special.

The authors are quick to note that the United States (in the Middle East, for example) also sells to both sides, just as Cummings does. *Deadly Business* does not challenge Sam Cummings' moral view. Indeed, it appears to accept it. Certainly, the authors have a point in suggesting, as Cummings does, that disarmament might well begin with Lockheed, Boeing, and General Dynamics, and only then reach the much smaller empire of Interarms. And yet . . . are we to believe there is no difference between Sam Cummings and Albert Schweitzer? Or between a salesman of surgical dressings and a salesman of guns? Perhaps objects have no moral content, but, statistically, the number of violent murders committed with a daffodil, a violin, a book (even a heavy book), or a painting, is probably rather small.

Sam Cummings lives in Monte Carlo in the winter and the Swiss Alps in the summer, and presides over an international arsenal based in Manchester, England, and Alexandria, Virginia. Besides buying and selling arms, he makes them—among other places in Midland, near Warrenton, in the heart of the Virginia hunt country. He is said to have boasted that he could arm 40 divisions from his warehouses.

Cummings was born into a well-to-do milieu in Philadelphia, but with the death of his father and the onset of the Depression, the family fell on hard times. His mother supported them by buying houses, upgrading them, selling and moving on. They moved to Washington during World War II, and Sam attended Sidwell Friends School, a Quaker institution.

In 1950, he went to work for the CIA. He was already a gun expert, having acquired his first, a 40-pound World War I German Maxim machine gun, at the age of 5. Allen Dulles sent him to Europe to buy surplus German arms for Chiang Kai-shek. CIA agent Cummings masqueraded as a Hollywood producer buying up guns for the movies.

He left the CIA in 1953 and at the age of 26, founded his own arms company. Guatemala followed. The CIA installed Col. Carlos Castillo-Armas and guess who then got the contract to supply hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of guns to the new government? "Cummings had made an enormous profit out of the 1954 revolution. There, at the very least, his CIA connections had proved hugely profitable."

Does Cummings still front for the CIA? Given his line of work, the suspicion has sometimes arisen that the former CIA arms expert has not completely severed his ties to the agency. He certainly does nothing to discourage the impression that he still has Langley's blessing. One of his real estate companies in Virginia is called Cummings Investment Associates. His telephones have CIA stickers reading, "CAUTION: speech on this telephone is NOT SECURE."

Patrick Brogan, the former Washington correspondnet of the *London Times*, and Albert Zarca, who first won Cummings' cooperation for the book, have woven a provocative but disturbingly one-dimensional portrait of the world's most powerful independent arms dealer.

If they are to be taken literally, Cummings obeys the export and import laws of the United States and other nations as scrupulously as a divinity student. He does not, they emphasize, smoke, drink, or gamble. He is a nice family man, with a wife and children, who happens to deal in armaments. A sort of lethal Mr. Clean.

Cummings' clever business deals are detailed at far greater length than necessary, although at least some are intriguing: an Interarms shipment of Armalite rifles for Cuba's Batista was on the high seas in 1959 when Castro took over; Fidel paid Cummings for Batista's rifles and ordered more. Cummings sold Israeli UZI submachine guns to the U.S. Secret Service, to protect the president. He even sold 140 lances to the Sudanese ceremonial camel corps.

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